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Wednesday, September 27, 2006

Slaughter Denounces Military Commissions Act as Assault on America's Core Values

Washington, DC - Rep. Louise M. Slaughter (D-NY-28), Ranking Member of the House Rules Committee, today delivered a speech on the House floor criticizing H.R. 6054, the Military Commissions Act of 2006, for abandoning America's core values and undermining the country's national security.

"We are at a crossroads today, and I fear that we will not be judged kindly by future Americans for what my Republican friends want us to do today," Rep.

Slaughter said in her remarks.

"This bill sends a clear message to both our friends and our enemies about what kind of people we are.

"Sadly, M. Speaker, those watching today will conclude that when the going gets

tough, America's leaders are willing abandon our values, abandon them in favor of thuggish tactics they hope might make them safer for a little while.

"Let me emphasize that: because it is indeed a false sense of security, M. Speaker. After five years of secret detentions, torture, warrant-less surveillance, and hyped-up stories about weapons of mass destruction, are we today any safer from the threat of terrorism? The answer is: no, we are not."

Rep. Slaughter also spoke of the case of Bilal Hussein, an Iraqi journalist working for the Associated Press who has been held for five months by the American military without charges being brought against him.

"Under this bill, M. Speaker, Bilal could be declared to be an enemy combatant, sent to an American detention facility, and kept there indefinitely. No charges would ever have to be brought against him. His permanent detention would never have to be defended in a court of law.

"Imagine if another nation held an American citizen without charging them of a crime. Imagine if it refused to allow them to even see the evidence against them. What would we say about such a country?

"And so, I ask my friends on the other side of the aisle: what are we supposed to say about our country today?" Rep. Slaughter concluded.

The complete text of Rep. Slaughter's remarks, as prepared, is included below:

M. Speaker,

The critically important legislation before us today is being presented as a bi-partisan compromise. But it is nothing of the sort.

It was authored by the Administration and by the Republican leaders of this Congress. As Chairman Hunter testified in the Rules Committee yesterday, no Democrats were involved in the negotiations he conducted over the weekend to produce this bill. Nor did the Rules Committee make in order any of the 15 amendments Democrats offered to address the sections of this bill that most offend our Democratic values and violate our most fundamental traditions. The closed rule governing this bill means that this Republican Congress is turning its back on a real debate here today.

It is a reality made all the more egregious by the historic importance of this moment. We are at a crossroads today, and I fear that we will not be judged kindly by future Americans for what my Republican friends want us to do today. This bill sends a clear message to both our friends and our enemies about what kind of people we are.

It shows them whether or not we are really willing to practice what we preach about freedom, democracy, and human dignity. It is moments like this one when we reveal our true colors, and our real values.

Sadly, M. Speaker, those watching today will conclude that when the going gets tough, America's leaders are willing to abandon our values, abandon them in favor of thuggish tactics they hope might make them safer for a little while.

In his second Inaugural Address, our President used noble words to describe America's role in the world and its duty as a beacon of hope for all nations.

He said, and I quote, "From the day of our Founding, we have proclaimed that every man and woman on this earth has rights, and dignity, and matchless value," end quote.

Those were inspirational words. But here is the reality:

For years, this Administration has circumvented our Constitution in the name of security. Its officials have dismissed even the most important of our legal documents - such as the Geneva Convention - as being nothing more than "quaint."

This Administration and this Republican Congress have allowed detainees to sit in prison for years without charging them with any crime. They are willing to deprive people of even the most basic due process rights our country has always afforded those held by the government. They are willing to convict people of crimes without giving them any opportunity to review the evidence the government is using against them. They are willing to try and convict people based on unreliable evidence acquired through cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment that the rest of the world recognizes as torture.

They are willing to allow government officials to degrade and torment other human beings in ways that the civilized nations agreed to outlaw sixty years ago. They are even willing to make any new legislation we pass today retroactive, so that past abuses may be forgotten instead of being sincerely addressed.

What this Congress is showing the world today is that we are willing to trade our national birthright for a false and temporary sense of security.

Let me emphasize that: because it is indeed a false sense of security, M. Speaker. After five years of secret detentions, torture, warrant-less surveillance, and hyped-up stories about weapons of mass destruction, are we today any safer from the threat of terrorism? The answer is: no, we are not.

In fact, as we learned earlier this week, our country's intelligence agencies informed the President a few months ago that we are actually less safe than we were in 2001. Mistreating our prisoners and depriving them of the basic due process rights of our legal system isn't making us safer. All it is doing is slowly wearing away the fabric of our democratic society - undermining the essential nature that makes us different from our enemies.

When we degrade and mistreat our enemy prisoners, we degrade ourselves and the democratic values we have inherited from generations of brave and decent Americans. We are ceding the moral high ground those who founded this country - and the men and women who have served it ever since - won with their blood, sweat, and tears.

What is more, legislation like this puts our soldiers themselves at risk. During the course of our national debate on this issue, a number of prominent Admirals, Generals, and other military leaders have spoken out against this bill. They have told us time and again that ignoring our American values puts our U.S. military personnel deployed overseas in danger. They have said that respect for the rules of military engagement and prisoner treatment are more than just an important part of our heritage. They also protect Americans captured and imprisoned by foreign powers.

M. Speaker, how is endangering our troops making us any safer? How is undermining our moral standing helping us win allies in the war of ideas we face? The answer is simple: it is not.

At this very moment, there are hundreds if not thousands of people being held in facilities whose fates will depend on this legislation. I want to take a moment to talk about just one of them.

Bilal Hussein is an Iraqi who worked as a photographer for the Associated Press. He has been held in Iraq by American forces for five months. He was accused of aiding and abetting the insurgency, but he has yet to be charged with any crime. He has been given no access to a lawyer or a court, and has not been able to see the evidence against him. The Associated Press has stood by him and repeatedly defended his innocence.

Under this bill, M. Speaker, Bilal could be declared to be an enemy combatant, sent to an American detention facility, and kept there indefinitely. No charges would ever have to be brought against him. His permanent detention would never have to be defended in a court of law.

Imagine if another nation held an American citizen without charging them of a crime. Imagine if it refused to allow them to even see the evidence against them. What would we say about such a country? And so, I ask my friends on the other side of the aisle: what are we supposed to say about our country today?

In his inaugural address of two years ago, the President had this to say about the soul of America, and I quote: "When the Declaration of Independence was first read in public and the Liberty Bell was sounded in celebration, a witness said, it rang as if it meant something. In our time it means something still," end quote.

This bill gives the lie to his speech. And it gives the lie to what should be our nation's greatest asset, our greatest weapon in the fight against terrorism and oppression: our values.

I ask everyone in this House to reject this bill. I ask everyone here to chart a new course for America. If we reject torture, if we stand up for the legal system and fundamental rights that are

the basis for liberty and the only real source of security we have, then we will have come a long way in our battle against the threats our nation faces in the world today.

My friends and colleagues: don't turn your back on the past. It is in its lessons and principals that we will find the key to a safer and more just future.

I reserve the balance of my time.

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